GLOBAL 24.04.2019 | Sheri Berman

Populism and the embrace of complexity

Populists may often thrive with simple narratives. But simple explanations of populism itself will not pass muster

Understanding the rise of populism is among the most urgent tasks facing social scientists and concerned citizens today. In a rush to understand, many long for simple, straightforward answers. If we want to understand populism, however, such a preference for parsimony will lead us astray.

Most often, explanations of populism focus on economic or social grievances that purportedly lead some citizens to vote for populist parties.

Accounts based on economic grievances are popular amongeconomists who argue that globalisation, income stagnation, the decline of well-paying, blue-collar jobs, increasing inequality and deepening divisions between dynamic metropolitan regions and stagnating mid-size cities and rural areas have generated a growing number of voters who feel 'left behind'. The financial crisis accelerated these trends, pushing even more voters to the extremes.

Social scientists, especially those focusing on the United States, by contrast often favour accounts based on social grievances which argue that immigration and the mobilisation of women and minority groups have challenged ethnic and gender hierarchies, generating a counter-reaction, particularly among white men. The 'refugee crisis' in Europe and the election of the first African-American president in the US led even more voters to feel resentful and threatened, in this view, and so willing to vote for populists promising to protect their interests.

Interactions

Accounts focusing on social or economic grievances provide important insights into populism, but in the real world both matter and they interact in complex ways. For example, the tendency to scapegoat immigrants and minorities rises during difficult economic times when

low-income citizens in particular are worried about unemployment and concerned about competition over scarce public resources, such as housing or welfare benefits.

In addition, individuals' social values and preferences are shaped by their economic position and context. It is not surprising that 'new' middle-class voters living in diverse cities and working in jobs where they interact regularly with other highly-educated people from a variety of backgrounds are socially progressive, while working-class voters are more socially conservative and may have become even more so as class identities 'made possible by factory-based, unionized jobs in the old economy have faded [and] other identities — ones often associated with hard-line conservative politics — have … filled the void'.

And while the proximate cause of populism may be a 'cultural backlash' against social change, based on analysis of decades of World Values Survey data, Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart argue that it is impossible to understand why voters have become susceptible to xenophobia and socially reactionary views without paying attention to the impact of economic insecurity.

Supply side

However, no matter how wide-ranging they are, explanations that focus on social, economic and other grievances alone — the 'demand-side' of politics — can get us only so far. Grievances, like attitudes and preferences more generally, are not simply or directly translated into political outcomes. Instead, they only become politically salient or powerful when mobilised and organised by politicians and parties. Understanding populism, in other words, also requires paying attention to the 'supply-side' of politics: the nature and behaviour of politicians, parties and other key political actors.

The obvious place to begin is with populist parties themselves. Their ability to mobilise grievances and attract voters depends on how they present themselves to the public. Many populist parties began as, or had their roots in, neo-fascist or otherwise anti-democratic movements. But parties with such appeals were consistently rejected by the electorate.

More significant, however, in determining populism's success seems to be traditional parties' own

It was only after moderating their positions — becoming xenophobic rather than neo-fascist and accepting, indeed in some cases claiming to be champions of, democracy — that far-right parties' vote shares increased. The ability or willingness of right-wing populists to offer

policy profiles, or rather the relationship among them.

simple, clear answers to complex problems such as immigration, as opposed to the left's tendency to offer 'abstract, intellectual ideas' and complex narratives, has probably also contributed to their success. And populist parties with more developed internal organisations, less factionalism, stronger leaders and committed and experienced activists are better able to attract and mobilise voters over the long term.

But a focus on populist parties alone is also not enough: their success is conditioned by other parties' behaviour, as well as their own. Some argue that whether traditional parties adopt*dismissive* (ignoring), *accommodative* (adapting their own policy profiles) or *adversarial* (forthrightly rejecting) stances towards populist parties' pet issues matters.

More significant, however, in determining populism's success seems to be traditional parties' own policy profiles, or rather the relationship among them. In particular, scholars find that populists thrive when the platforms of centre-left and centre-right parties converge; grand coalitions between the centre-left and centre-right also seem to boost populism's electoral fortunes.

A less distinctive left

As centre-left parties moved towards the centre economically during the last decades of the 20th century, their hold on the working class weakened and right-wing populist parties, most of which began their existence espousing conservative or neoliberal economic policies, moved to the left economically to capture these voters.

In addition, as the centre-left's economic profile became less distinctive, the tendency to emphasise social, rather than economic issues, increased. As one group of scholars concluded, where parties of the left embraced pro-market, neoliberal reforms, politicians could not polarise electoral competition around economic issues and were accordingly incentivised to construct 'a single powerful socio-cultural divide on which to display meaningful programmatic differences and employ those to attract voters'. Similarly, another cross-national study of parties' shifting economic profiles found that as parties became increasingly similar in terms of economic policy an attractive 'survival strategy' was politicising non-economic issues: 'The strategy of shifting competition to a new issue domain allows parties to better distinguish themselves from one another

and thereby avoid losing voters to indifference.'

The problem for the traditional left, of course, is that when political competition focuses on such social issues as national identity, immigration, multiculturalism and so on, the prime beneficiaries are new-left parties, such as the Greens, and far-right populists — since such issues are most associated with them and their core constituencies (respectively, progressive, highly-educated professionals and working- and lower-middle-class voters) are united by them.

Albert Einstein once said that 'politics is more difficult than physics'. Einstein was referring to the difficulty of coming up with solutions to pressing political problems, but his quip is equally applicable to merely understanding political phenomena. While parsimony is intellectually and psychological satisfying, understanding populism requires embracing complexity and bringing together insights from a variety of perspectives.

This article is a joint publication by Social Europe and IPS-Journal

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Sheri Berman
New York City

Sheri Berman is a professor of political science at Barnard College and author of *Democracy and Dictatorship in Europe. From the Ancien Régime to the Present Day*(Oxford University Press).